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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3463
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 8465
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5930
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0634
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2741
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000441

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: GSL ACHIEVES PROGRESS ON CHILD SOLDIERS

REF: A. COLOMBO 00410

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 00369

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: UNICEF reported that in April, the number of child soldiers with the TMVP on whom it has files dropped by 55, to a total of 76. The actual number still with the TMVP is likely higher, possibly 200-250. Nevertheless, the GSL is clearly pushing the TMVP to release child soldiers, and achieving results. Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Mahinda Samarasinghe and Justice Secretary Suhada Gamalath continue to engage closely on this issue. While the GSL and UNICEF prefer to release children directly to their parents when possible, the government is also mobilizing to provide rehabilitation at a center in Ambepussa. Both Samarasinghe and Gamalath predict further releases in the near future. End summary.

Number of Known TMVP Child Soldiers
Drops by 55 in April

[1](#)2. (C) On May 5 UNICEF held a roundtable discussion for several foreign missions that are following the child soldier issue. UNICEF reported that in April, the total number of child soldiers with the TMVP on whom it has files dropped by 55, from 131 to 76. Of the 39 children released through official channels in April, 72 percent were not already registered by UNICEF as recruited. This evidence of under-reporting corroborates UNICEF's general estimate that their numbers on child soldiers, obtained through parents coming forward, are about one third of the actual number. The April numbers reflect 44 children who were discovered at home during UNICEF's house visits, but who were not involved in the two official releases last month.

[1](#)3. (C) UNICEF judges that parents are less frequently reporting their child's return because they are less afraid of re-recruitment by the LTTE. Other factors include the distance to UNICEF offices and lack of awareness on the need to report returns. On the other hand, parents' reduced reporting of recruitment may be due to the lower danger to recruited children (i.e. cessation of hostilities in the East), the incentive of pay to child soldiers, and/or

intimidation by the TMVP. UNICEF remains concerned that reduced reporting does not necessarily mean reduced recruitment.

Background on April 24 Release of 28 Children

¶4. (C) Twenty-eight child soldiers were released by the TMVP on April 24 (ref A). The handover at the mayor,s office in Batticaloa was organized by Justice Secretary Suhada Gamalath. Representatives from UNICEF, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, the Sri Lankan army, and the police, in addition to the Ministry of Justice, were present. The TMVP did not attend. Philippe Duamelle, UNICEF,s resident representative in Sri Lanka, told DCM that the release was well-organized. Twenty-one children were released to family members who were present at the mayor,s office. The other seven were placed temporarily in police custody, and subsequently turned over to their families. Duamelle noted that some of the children had been forcibly recruited by the TMVP, while others, attracted by wages of approximately \$60 per month, had volunteered.

¶5. (C) Both Duamelle and Justice Secretary Gamalath told DCM that the best scenario is for the children to return home provided their families are prepared to take them back and ensure that they return to school. UNICEF, the National Child Protection Authority (which comes under the Ministry of Child Development and Women,s Empowerment), and Save the Children will conduct needs assessments of all the children

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who were released and will monitor and support their reintegration. The children will be required to report to the police once every two weeks to confirm that they have not been re-recruited.

Rehabilitation at Ambepussa Center

¶6. (C) UNICEF reports that the 11 children who were released on April 7 (ref B) have been moved from the Palekelle reception center to a rehabilitation facility at Ambepussa, where they are housed with 14 other former child soldiers, who escaped from or were released by the LTTE. UNICEF reports that as of May 5, there have been no problems between the TMVP and LTTE child soldiers. (The 28 children released on April 24 were immediately or soon after reunited with their families, and were not taken to Ambepussa.)

Elections May Hinder Releases

¶7. (C) In the run up to May 10 elections in the East, there is anecdotal evidence that the TMVP may want to hold onto its child soldiers because they constitute a significant portion of total TMVP cadres. During a trip to Ampara District on May 1-2, a local UNICEF worker told Emboff that he estimated the TMVP had 250-300 cadres in the district, of which 60-70 percent were under age 18. Emboff saw one TMVP child soldier on the coastal road near Akkaraipattu.

Government Making Good Effort

¶8. (C) Duamelle assessed that the GSL appears to be making a good effort to comply with the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which requires that governments prevent recruitment of child soldiers in areas they control and provide rehabilitation services to former child combatants. Sri Lanka signed the protocol in 2002. Duamelle commended the engagement of the Ministry of Defense on preventing recruitment and pushing for releases. He acknowledged that government resources for rehabilitation are limited, but applauded the commitment of the GSL to do what it can, and said that UNICEF and other international

organizations are prepared to assist.

¶9. (C) During the week of April 28, Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Mahinda Samarasinghe and Justice Secretary Gamalath told the Ambassador and DCM, respectively, that further releases are expected in the near future. Gamalath optimistically remarked that the GSL hopes to obtain the release of "all" TMVP child soldiers by the end of May. At the meeting for the Consultative Committee on Humanitarian Affairs on April 29, Ambassador and Duamelle both praised the efforts of the GSL to win the releases and urged the GSL to keep up the pressure on the TMVP.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: The second release of 28 children on April 24 is welcome news. The GSL is pushing the TMVP on releases and achieving results. We do not know whether the 44 children whom UNICEF found in April to have returned home were released quietly by the TMVP, or ran away. However, it is possible that GSL pressure is eliciting quiet, unofficial releases, in addition to the formal releases witnessed by UNICEF. The GSL is mobilizing for the rehabilitation of child soldiers through the center at Ambepussa. We will continue to urge the government to achieve additional releases in the near future.

BLAKE